The Waters of Life: Panel discusses water as a human right

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Here in the United States, citizens are rarely asked to think about their access to water. But at a panel discussion hosted by the University of Connecticut, experts discussed the fight to make water a human right across the world.

Humans already deplete rivers and use groundwater unsustainably, California Pacific Institute President Peter Gleick said, but with continued exploitation of resources and the effects of global climate change, these water problems will only get worse.

Gleick discussed the importance of acknowledging the human right to water around the world and outlined the history of how water became a human rights issue.

"Why is water not mentioned in foundational human rights documents," Gleick asked.

When the original writers drafted these documents, Gleick said, they didn't think about water because they assumed it was already a human right.

"What does a human right to water mean? Who's going to implement it and how," Gleick asked further.

Christiana Peppard, an assistant professor of theology, science and ethics at Fordham University, said she was taken aback when she was first introduced to the concept of human rights as a fiction. Since then, she's realized this perspective only increases their importance to the human psyche.

"They are fictions in that they are invented, they are not necessarily self-evident, equally perceived, that is, by anyone who looks at a given situation, but they are real because once they are heard and accepted and recognized, they are a moral intellectual force," Peppard said.

This open-ended concept means understanding the right to water, which runs through a tap in some places and requires hour long treks to a well in others, on a global scale requires an interdisciplinary approach.

"Water requires us in unique ways to become multilingual, I don't mean just that I ought to speak multiple languages because of the translation of what Mni means," Peppard said. "I mean that waters are subjected to so many ways of understanding that they cannot be understood in one mode."

Today, the United Nations recognizes a formal human right to water and has led the way for the rest of the world to begin recognizing the issue, Gleick said. Other panelists argued that we have already established a framework for creating sustainable conditions across the globe.

Candace Ducheneaux, founder of Mni, a grassroots water justice group and a Hohwoju Lakota elder, said repairing the water cycle in indigenous nations and reservations could serve as an example for sustainability worldwide.

"The solution is simple, we must stop treating the waters as an expendable resource," Ducheneaux said. "We're all indigenous to the Earth, we're all children of the Earth, so we all have those same teachings that come from Mother Earth, so we have to start to look within ourselves."

The U.N.'s resolution outlines key points to ensure that people have the right to water, Gleick said. They include availability, quality, acceptability, accessibility and affordability.

Water needs to be adequately and consistently available, Gleick said. It has to be safe for consumption, sanitation facilities have to be acceptable in different cultures and people must has access to water nearby and water needs to be affordable, he said.

Even though affordability is important, that doesn't mean water has to be free, Gleick said. In fact, Americans should be paying more for water.

Despite this declaration to a human right to water, there are still many problems, Gleick said. Services for the transportation and sanitation of water have to be paid for in the price of water and governments should oversee the private sector to ensure the human right to water is being met.

"A declaration for the human right to water doesn't mean we are going to solve all of our water problems," Gleick said. "It's a piece of a big puzzle."

Even though there are many more issues to address, Gleick said that he is confident the U.N.'s declaration for the human right to water is making a difference.

"Countries around the world are beginning to respond to the declaration" Gleick said.

Consciously choosing to discuss water through this ethical framework, Peppard said, allows for full consideration of culture, gender and the economy's influence on a nation's water supply.

"Water is universal, it is a universal substrate and it is also essential for all forms of life, but it is not necessarily uniform," Peppard said. "What water looks like in the Sierra is different from what water looks like in Seattle."

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